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THE CHRISTIAN MINISTER,

HIS RESPECTABILITY AND SUCCESS IN CONNECTION WITH THE PRAYERS OF HIS FLOCK:

A DISCOURSE

DELIVERED ON THE OCCASION OF

ENTERING UPON THE PASTORAL CHARGE

OF THE

Fairmount Presbyterian Church,

Sabbath, July 19th, 1868.

BY

REV. SAMUEL R. KERR, A. M.

PUBLISHED BY THE CONGREGATION.

PITTSBURGH:
PRINTED BY BAKEWELL & MARTHENS, NO. 71 GRANT ST.
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DISCOURSE.

"PRAY FOR US: FOR WE TRUST WE HAVE A GOOD CONSCIENCE, IN ALL THINGS WILLING TO LIVE HONESTLY."
Hebrews 13 : 18.

My Brethren, the Apostle Paul, whose words have just been read, was endowed with intellectual abilities of the first order. He was accomplished in all the learning and other acquirements of his age, eminent in every department of literature and science, converted to the Christian faith by a special revelation of Jesus, and appointed by him to be a chosen vessel to bear his name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the house of Israel. In the prosecution of his charge he expended all the energies of his highly gifted mind. In knowledge of the gospel and success in exhibiting it, in devotedness to Christ and sufferings for his sake, in spiritual gifts and the abundance of revelations, he was "not a whit behind the very chiefest apostles." Yet with all these splendid endowments he was deeply conscious of his utter unworthiness and utter unfitness for the high and responsible office to which he had been raised. When he thought of what he was and what

he should be, his feelings overpowered him. "I was with you," says he to the Corinthians, "I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling." And it was the same frame of mind which led him earnestly to implore an interest in the prayers of his hearers. "Pray for us: for we trust we have a good conscience, in all things willing to live honestly." If such were the feelings of the chief of the apostles, what should be mine? If one of such transcendent piety and supernatural endowments begged an interest in the fervent supplications of the saints, of how much higher importance is it that the individual who now addresses you should be borne upon your spirits to a throne of grace? We trust, brethren, that we have some adequate feeling of the importance of that office with which we have been invested, and of the awful responsibility which it involves, and that we stand excused before the Most High God, and you the people of our charge, for adopting the Apostle's language and meeting you this morning with his urgent request, "Pray for us: for we trust we have a good conscience, in all things willing to live honestly."

The subject, then, to which our attention is directed from these words, is,

THE RESPECTABILITY AND SUCCESS OF A CHRISTIAN MINISTER, CONNECTED WITH THE PRAYERS OF HIS FLOCK.

And to illustrate it, we shall call your attention

I. *To the personal qualifications requisite for our office.*

II. *To the duties attendant upon it.*

III. *To the discouragements incident to it.*

IV. *Urge the request from the motives which originate from our office.*

In the first place, we call your attention to the personal qualifications requisite for our office. These are specified by the Apostle, and are of a two-fold description, "a good conscience, and living honestly." The former implies the personality of religion; the latter, respectability of character. We say the text implies, in the first place, the personality of religion. "We *trust*," saith Paul, "we have a good conscience." He might have said, we know that we have a good conscience. But the Apostle was an humble man, and his language may put to the blush some who are incessantly vaunting of the purity of their motives and of the certainty of their vital piety.

Conscience is that faculty of the soul which pronounces judgment upon the volitions of the heart and the actions of the life. But it is not infallible in its dictates. Its opinion is always formed according to the degree of knowledge which a man possesses of good and evil. So if his judgment be under the influence of erroneous principles, the

conclusions which his conscience deduces must be erroneous also. The standard is defective. The history of the Apostle whose words we are considering affords an illustration. He had an approving conscience even when persecuting with relentless fury the church of God. "I verily thought with myself," says he, "that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth."

A good conscience has two properties. These are illumination and sincerity. It must be well informed. It must act under the influence of an enlightened judgment. Now, to possess this illumination, it is necessary for a minister or private Christian to be a subject of divine grace, because it is divine grace alone which qualifies the mind to form a correct estimate of good and evil, of truth and error, and the lines of demarcation between them. "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." "If our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: in whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them." There must be a spiritual discernment and a holy taste engendered in us, before we can understand the Scriptures. These divine oracles cannot be fully

understood or relished until we receive the stamp and impression of them on our hearts.

But sincerity as well as illumination is necessary to constitute a good conscience. It must be sincere. It must perform its duty faithfully. It must approve or condemn continually. Personal godliness is indispensably necessary to constitute a faithful minister of the Lord Jesus Christ. This neither schools, nor colleges, nor theological seminaries can supply, and without it, the greatest talents and most overpowering eloquence will only dazzle and destroy. There must be a principle of inward piety and devotedness to God, and this the Holy Spirit alone can impart. And even where it has been imparted —where it does exist, it requires to be habitually cherished. Without intimate communion and fellowship with the Master we serve, the live coals of the altar will be put out by our touch, and the work of the study and of the sanctuary will be a drudgery from which we shall feel happy to escape. But the personality of religion will support amid all the anxieties of the study, a fervor and unction will be diffused through our prayers, and an energy imparted to our discourses which, through accompanying grace, will overawe the profane, comfort the disconsolate, and render the house of God the gate of heaven. Oh then, pray for us, that we may walk much with God—that we may live near unto

him. It is only the shadow of his wings which will shelter us from evils to which you as hearers are not exposed. It is only the light of his countenance which can cheer our spirits under circumstances of depression which you never feel. It is only intercourse and communion with him which can render us like the high priest of old, who was to be the minister of God to the people, more, much more by the richness of the perfume which he diffused, than by the splendors of the dress in which he was arrayed, or by the sound of the bells he wore.

Ministers are in exceeding danger of declining in religion from the very circumstance of religion being their employment. I believe no man was ever more religious for having his mind constantly employed about it. This may seem a paradox and absurd to some, but those who reflect for a moment how little necessary connection there is between the study of the system of divinity and spirituality of mind, will readily subscribe to the truth of the statement. Our religious character depends not on the nature of our vocation, but on the motives by which we are actuated in it. Religion considered as a matter of speculation or of instruction, is as secular an object of pursuit as poetry or painting.

None have greater reason to be jealous over themselves with a godly jealousy than ministers. It is our business to peruse the Scriptures and think much

on divine subjects, to preach, and pray, and converse about them, and unless we are habitually cautious, we are in exceeding danger of doing so merely as the work of our ministerial calling. It requires large and incessant communications of divine grace, to maintain under these circumstances the spirit of religion. Pray then, dear brethren, for us, that in discharging the duties of our office we may have "a heart right with God," and be enabled to "grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ."

The next qualification in a minister is "living honestly," which implies in the second place respectability of character. The original term here rendered "honestly" includes much more than is generally understood by that phrase. It signifies respectability of character in general. The mitre which adorned the brow of the high priest was a significant emblem of that "holiness" which should be exemplified in the conduct of those who labor in holy things. They owe mankind a good example as well as sound doctrine; and the one is an ordinance for their conversation and instruction no less than the other. "Be thou an example of the believers," says Paul to Timothy, "in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity." "Be ye blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among

whom ye shine as lights in the world: holding forth the word of life: that I may rejoice in the day of Christ, that I have not run in vain, neither labored in vain." But it is not merely necessary that a minister should be harmless. That men can substantiate no charge of vice against him, he must be so pre-eminently holy that even his enemies will admit it. A bishop must not merely be blameless, he must have a good report of them which are without. "This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work. A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behavior, given to hospitality, apt to teach; not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient; not a brawler, not covetous; one that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; (for if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?) not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil." 1 Timothy 3: 1–7.

An ungodly minister is, of all characters, the most unnatural and the most odious; and, I may add, the most guilty. He brings unmerited odium upon the hallowed name by which he is called.

He hardens scoffers against religion. He incurs the guilt and infamy of Jeroboam, who is never mentioned but to be stigmatized as he who "made Israel to sin." "It must needs be that offenses come; but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh." There are too many ministers, and ministers of whom we may charitably indulge the hope that they are Christians, whose conduct in the parlor ill accords with their appearance in the pulpit; who by the levity of their deportment, and the frivolousness of their conversation, and the selfishness of their spirit, exhibit a striking contrast to the humbling, self-denying doctrines which they inculcate. Brethren, pray for us, that we may be preserved from this snare; "giving no offense in any thing, that the ministry be not blamed." We are men of like passions with yourselves. If God withdraw his grace from me, I am capable of perpetrating any crime. If God Almighty withdraw his grace from me, I may blast my character, and ruin my public usefulness, and render my warmest friends ashamed to own me. Pray for me, that I may "hold the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience," and "adorn the doctrine of God my Saviour in all things," and that I may be enabled to say at last with our Apostle: "Our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity and godly

sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, we have had our conversation in the world, and more abundantly to you-ward." "Pray for us: for we trust we have a good conscience, in all things willing to live honestly."

To enforce this request further, we call your attention, in the second place, to the duties connected with the office we sustain. The grand object of the Christian ministry is "to turn men from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified." "Whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man, in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus." The summit of our ambition is to save those who hear us, to qualify them while in the church militant to unite with all the ransomed of the Lord in the church triumphant. And how is this object to be attained? Not by lectures on morality, but by the preaching of the glorious gospel of the grace of God. This is the work of our ministry. We shall merely advert a little to the manner of our discharging it.. We must do so *faithfully*. We are to speak boldly, fearing no man's enmity and courting no man's friendship at the expense of truth. Though we would not willingly or intentionally wound any one's feelings, yet we must be honest

to our conscience and honest to our God. But this fidelity is to be accompanied with *affection*. We are to speak in love, not lording it over God's heritage, but with a manner and a strain which evince that our heart's desire and prayer to God for you is that ye may be saved. Unless we live in your affection and esteem, we can have no reasonable prospect of usefulness among you. Unless you feel convinced that we seek your welfare, you will reject our counsels and spurn our reproofs.

The gospel should also be preached *judiciously*. It is a high attainment "rightly to divide the word of truth." And to reach this, it is necessary that a minister should have a very extensive knowledge of human character, and a very extensive acquaintance of the Scriptures; a sound, discriminating judgment, and a studious disposition. In one word, the whole counsel of God is to be disclosed in all its relative bearings, that by bringing things new and old out of the treasury of God, we may meet the diversified necessities of those who hear us; and we must be incessant in our labors, "instant in season and out of season."

If you add to this catalogue of duties, my brethren, those of administering ordinances, visiting the sick, catechising, and family visitation, does not the mighty amount show how much we need

your fervent prayers? Plead that these gifts and graces which your pastor so much needs may be imparted to him, and that those which he already possesses may be preserved and increased.

This will appear more necessary still if we consider, in the third place, the discouragements attendant upon or incident to our office. There are many who regard the ministry as a mere sinecure, and look on those who are in it as devoid of all care, enjoying undisturbed ease and tranquility. Those who have made the experiment, entertain respecting it very different sentiments. The most holy men have not hesitated to acknowledge that, if at the commencement of their ministerial career, they could have foreseen all the trials and discouragements which were in reserve for them, they would have declined the station. The Prophet Jeremiah seems to insinuate that he was brought into it by a species of deception. "O Lord, thou hast deceived me, and I was deceived." Could candidates for the sacred office look into futurity, how often would the language of Moses have heen repeated, "O my Lord, send, I pray thee, by the hand of him whom thou wilt send." And not one in a hundred would say with Isaiah, "Here am I; send me."

The speaker has comparatively a very imperfect knowledge of these discouragements. He has, how-

ever, experienced some of them, and he can easily imagine the source of others. Some of these arise from the nature of the office. We have seen that it is designed to render the depraved and the impure "holy, and harmless, and without rebuke." The very mention of such an employment is sufficient to convince us that the difficulties connected with it are of no common magnitude, and to induce us to exclaim with Paul, "Who is sufficient for these things?"

Men are by nature universally indisposed to the reception of the truth. It is most abhorrent to all their prejudices and dearest wishes. They do not feel their guilt and danger, and the man who attempts from Sabbath to Sabbath to convince them of these, will be represented as a messenger of evil tidings, and suspected of taking pleasure in overwhelming the soul with dark and evil forebodings. By many he will be regarded as delighting in the misery of his fellow creatures, and having in his religion a mixture of what is savage and inhuman. "I hate him," said the King of Israel respecting the prophet, "for he doth not prophesy good concerning me, but evil."

There is perhaps nothing more painful to an affectionate child than to be suspected by its parents of ingratitude and want of filial love. And we think there can scarcely be anything more painful to

a minister who loves his flock, than to be suspected by them of delighting in their misery. My hearers, even the denunciations of a faithful minister against the ungodly are dictated by compassion. He may be pronounced unfeeling, and cruel, but he is just as cruel and unfeeling as the passing traveler whose humanity has prompted him at the silent midnight hour to knock up the slumberers in a tenement which had just caught fire, because, perhaps he has disturbed some pleasing dream or disturbed their repose. He is just as cruel as the angel who mercifully laid violent hands on Lot, reluctant to depart from the city of destruction. And he might with as much justice and propriety have taxed that merciful messenger with cruelty, as hearers the servants of the Most High God for attempting to rouse them from impending destruction.

Our commission runs in the following fearful words: "Son of man, I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel: therefore, hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me. When I say unto the wicked, Thou shalt surely die; and thou givest him not warning, nor speakest to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life; the same wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand. Yet if thou warn the wicked, and he turn not from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he shall die in

his iniquity; but thou hast delivered thy soul. Again, when a righteous man doth turn from his righteousness, and commit iniquity, and I lay a stumbling-block before him, he shall die: because thou hast not given him warning, he shall die in his sin, and his righteousness which he hath done shall not be remembered; but his blood will I require at thine hand. Nevertheless, if thou warn the righteous man, that the righteous sin not, and he doth not sin, he shall surely live, because he is warned; also, thou hast delivered thy soul." Ezekiel 3:17–21. If at any time your minister should seem too urgent or too severe, let this solemn and awful charge be his apology and excuse. Too urgent he cannot be. It is at the hazard of his life that he speak deceitfully, and it is at the hazard of yours if he shall speak in vain.

The servants of Jesus who, with honest boldness, reprove vice and error wherever found, cannot expect exemption from malevolent aspersions. The enemies of truth and holiness who denounce the minister, will deride the servant, and strain every nerve to damp his ardor and mar his success. This was the life of our fathers who were set for the defense of the gospel, and it will be ours if we imbibe their spirit and walk in their steps. If we will not venture upon the enchanted ground of Antinomianism, and tell men that they may live

as they please, we will be stigmatized as legalists; and if, on the other hand, the doctrines of free sovereign grace form, as they ought, the leading features in our sermons, to the utter exclusion of all self-righteous pretension, then we will be traduced as the enemies of holiness and good works. If we cannot chime in with certain prevailing sentiments which are the great rage of the day, we will be pronounced illiberal and narrow minded. Brethren, pray for us, that we may be enabled "to contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints," and "in meekness to instruct those who oppose themselves; if peradventure God will give them repentance to acknowledge the truth." It frequently happens, I believe, that great offense is given unintentionally by a minister to his people. Should he be led by the Spirit of God to condemn any vices or practices unknown to him to which they are addicted, he is regarded as being malevolent in his intentions and personal in his remarks. How frequently is he reproached for nothing but being faithful to his solemn vows, as he would wish to be found among the saints at the "appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ."

Independent of these discouragements of a public nature, there are others which may be termed personal. When a minister reflects on the qualifica-

tions which he should possess, on the knowledge, patience, prudence, integrity and fortitude requisite, on the stores of biblical knowledge, and the intimate acquaintance with the state of his flock which he should have, and contrasts these with his acquirements, he may be greatly dispirited. If he ask his own heart, where is that ardent love to the Lord Jesus Christ; where that compassion for perishing sinners; where that meekness and heavenly mindedness which he should display? such questions cause him to blush before God, and he is often ready, in a fit of heartless despondency, to abandon his post as uncalled and unqualified to fill it. And we believe those, who are most severe in their animadversions upon his public appearance, would pity him and pray for him were they fully aware of the feelings which occasionally pervade his heart.

How little allowance is often made by congregations for the constitutional infirmities of their pastors. Hosts of nervous distempers are some times apt to seize the hard student, which he can never shake off afterward for life. The Bible may at times appear to him a sealed book. He may be often in deep anxiety about his own soul's salvation. The great enemy may at other times ply him with temptations. He must appear in the pulpit at the appointed hour, whatever be the

frame of his mind or the feelings of his heart; and yet how many thoughtlessly expect that his discourses shall be equally interesting and equally instructive.

Brethren, we trust that we shall obtain your indulgence, not to our errors or vices, but to the imperfections of our labors among you. If I want heart in the cause of your salvation, for that let me be despised. But if heart I have, for that let me secure your attention; for that, when I cannot tickle your ears, let me interest your souls. Do not look upon me as an actor set up for your amusement. I trust you will come up to the worship of God with higher and holier motives, and that while I manifest a desire to be useful to you, and "speak the words of truth and soberness," I will be acceptable to you, however deficient in natural endowments. Censure me if averse to spend and be spent for your salvation, but oh spare me the cruel lash of criticism if I cannot amuse you with "the enticing words of man's wisdom."

I urge the request of the Apostle, in the fourth and last place, from the motives which originate from the office we sustain. Pray for us, on the ground of duty. We are the man of your own choice; we labor for you; our heart's desire to God and our great aim is that you may be saved.

The larger portion of grace we possess and the more gifts we receive, the advantage will redound to yourselves. If prayer be restrained, we will not be mutual comforts to each other. "I shall be found unto you such as ye would not, and I shall not find you such as I would." "God may humble me among you."

In prayer you will find the grand secret of prosperity. Without the influence of the Spirit your minister will preach in vain; this house shall have been erected in vain; your attendance here will be in vain. There is a homely but most important proverb upon this subject: "A praying people make a preaching minister." How often is he censured by the disappointed worshiper, when in fact, the cause was in that worshiper. He had offered no fervent and special supplication for a blessing on his pastor's labors. He had, therefore, no right to expect it, and moreover, he was in no suitable frame to receive it, and thus it frequently happens that while the humble and earnest petitioner obtains a rich repast, the prayerless hearer departs empty away. I ask this favor, in in a word, as you value my salvation. "Pray for us," for if we perish our damnation will be double. The day of accounts and retribution is advancing. The solemn connection formed between us so lately is already in progress toward dissolution. I may

soon be called to my account! And if I shall be found to have been false to the trust reposed in me, dreadful assuredly shall be my doom. The blood of souls shall be required at my hand. And if misery be the portion of every transgressor, what shall be that of the minister upon whom the impenitent shall charge the ruin of his soul? "I acknowledge that I am guilty, but my spiritual guide confirmed me in guilt; at the time in which I violated thy precepts he proclaimed peace, peace, and I believed his report. He sanctioned my crimes by his own practices. Upon him I charge my destruction." My hearers, if sinners of a common description shall cry to the rocks to fall on them, will not the ungodly preacher cry in agony to the mountains to hide him from the presence of Him who sitteth upon the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! Pray then for me, "lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway." Pray that I may ever speak and act under the full influence of the apostolic exhortation: "Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee."

"As for me, God forbid that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you: but I will teach you the good and the right way."

"The Lord bless you, and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you, and be gracious unto you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace." "Peace be within thy walls, and prosperity within thy palaces. For my brethren and companion's sake, I will now say, Peace be within thee. Because of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek thy good." Amen.

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